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ABSTRACT

This study focused on creating a liaison between day care providers and college developmental psychology researchers with the intent that day care providers would be able to share discoveries and develop expertise in challenging infants appropriately to encourage development. The project was collaborated on by college students and faculty; the day care providers were all females that volunteered to participate. Out of a sample population of 39 caregivers from 10 different day care centers, 20 were teachers and 19 were managers. They completed a survey that addressed three issues: (1) respondents' perceptions of infants' engagement in current programming; (2) level of teacher morale in infant classrooms; and (3) impressions of the quality of the atmosphere in infant classrooms. The results showed that the teachers and managers were concerned with: (1) problems with the staff (such as poor morale and little professional pride, and difficulty in planning classroom activities); (2) problems with the children (such as individual differences and predictable developmental challenges); and (3) problems with the parents (such as angry and critical parents, anxious and guilty parents, and neglectful parents). It was also found that the day care providers were interested in receiving additional training and desired to participate in the professionalization of day care provision. (Contains 14 references.) (DCP)

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Obstacles to enhancing the learning environments of infants in day care: An evaluation of problems perceived by day care providers

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Introduction

This project was intended to help promote more optimal infant day care, by creating a liaison between day care providers and college developmental psychology researchers. In their day-to-day work with infants, day care providers develop expertise in how to challenge infants appropriately, in order to facilitate their development. Unfortunately, the burdensome caregiving demands on their time permit little opportunity for sharing their discoveries with other providers. They also are hard-pressed to find time to assess their impact objectively through use of empirical research methods.

Collaboration with college researchers, both students and

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faculty, allows providers the opportunity to contribute more widely to the development of their field. It also enables developmentalists the opportunity to incorporate recent neurophysiological findings about brain development in the design of infant educational programs. This offers the potential for inclusion of more optimizing developmental experiences in day care.

Before developing guidelines for use by day care center providers, a needs assessment was conducted. This process identified managers' and teachers' perceptions of obstacles to more effective service delivery. The concerns voiced by these day care providers formed the basis for the subsequent development of instructional materials.

1997 Day Care Providers Survey

Problems perceived by day care providers

Method

A sample of 39 infant day care providers, consisting of 19 managers and 20 teachers, drawn from a total of 10 day care sites, was surveyed in order to determine principal areas of concern. All participants were female, with a mean age of 31.2 years, and an average of 5.3 years of experience in providing child care. Their participation was voluntary.

The questionnaire administered was designed to address three main variables: (1) respondents' perceptions of infants' engagement in current programming, (2) level of teacher morale in infant classrooms, and (3) impressions of the quality of their infant classrooms' atmosphere. Quantitative items were 4-point Likert style, and positively keyed. The survey instrument also included an open-ended item: "What do you see as some of the obstacles to more optimal class functioning?", to permit collection of more qualitiative data. Responses were collected anonymously, after assurances of confidentiality were provided.

Results

Between group t-test comparisons of managers' and teachers' evaluations of level of infant engagement revealed significant differences in perceptions of infant students. Managers perceived infants as significantly less engaged during the day than teachers did ($t=3.062$; $df=37$; $p<.01$). No significant differences emerged when responses about teacher morale or general classroom atmosphere of managers and teachers were compared.

The responses of both day care center managers and teachers to the survey suggested that there were several common underlying concerns. The infant day care providers expressed interest in finding ways to address three main problem areas: (1) Problems with Staff, (2) Problems with the Children, and (3) Problems with the Parents.

Comparison of Managers' and Teachers' Perceptions of Infant Day Care

	Managers (n=20)		Teachers (n=19)	
	mean	std.deviation	mean	std.deviation
Survey Items:				
Infant engagement*	2.9	.52	3.4	.50
Teacher Morale	3.1	.62	3.3	.47
Classroom climate	3.1	.46	3.25	.44

* $p<.01$

The managers and teachers expressed concerns about the following three main problem areas.

1. Problems with Staff

A. Poor morale and little professional pride

1. detracts from quality of classroom climate

a. aides are passive or custodial in their approach

b. rivalries among staff wastes energy

2. contributes to high turnover which reduces continuity of care

a. infants are deprived of stable relationships

b. inexperienced staff prevent smooth classroom operation and creative innovation

B. Difficulty in planning classroom activities

1. staff have limited time to develop activities

2. aides resist participating in activities and their planning

2. Problems with the Children

A. Individual differences create varying responses to elements of day care

1. adaptability and preferences for novelty

2. sociability

B. Developmental time table presents predictable challenges

3. Problems with the Parents

A. Angry and critical parents

1. undermine teacher's morale

2. put teachers and aides on the defensive

B. Anxious and guilty parents

1. complicate infants' separations in the morning

2. have difficulty following an appropriate, consistent routine

C. Neglectful parents

1. overburden day care staff

2. fail to build infants' skills and confidence at home

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that many day care providers feel that the potential exists to improve the quality of infant day care. Both managers and teachers perceived the average level of engagement of students in infant classrooms to be less than ideal, although managers reported higher levels of dissatisfaction than did teachers.

Poor morale and little professional pride were identified by many participants as areas of concern within day care centers. Incorporation of recent developmental research findings in the planning of classroom activities, to improve the quality of service delivery, and efforts to educate parents and the public about the value of appropriately stimulating educational opportunities for infants, may have a beneficial impact on day care providers' enthusiasm and commitment to their work. Much as empirical evidence of service efficacy was instrumental in helping early physicians gain the professional respect they desired, research evidence demonstrating the effects of quality day care will help to elevate the status of those involved in providing these services.

Difficulty in planning educational activities was also cited as a common problem. Experienced infant day care providers should be encouraged to share the solutions they have developed, in order to help more novice teachers organize infant care activities in a manner which permits occasions for staff to

collaborate in developing new approaches to challenging their students. Something as simple as using periods when several babies are sleeping and others are being quietly rocked for staff meetings can permit the building of team spirit and the crafting of group goals.

Several participants identified problems associated the needs and limitations of children during the infant period. Examining both the strengths and weaknesses of this particular developmental period can assist staff members in overcoming their resistance to work creatively to innovate new teaching approaches. Acknowledging the individual differences among infants in temperament can help reduce the risk of a "one size fits all" approach to teaching, and to help teachers and aides avoid the risk of overpersonalizing classroom failures.

Concerns related to working with difficult parents were mentioned by many survey respondents. The value of not reciprocating aggressive parental responses, and of exploring the underlying motivation for parental hostility needs to be emphasized. Addressing the needs of anxious and guilty parents can help to make them effective allies, who have the potential to bring a wide variety of resources to the infant classroom. Improving communication and forging collaborative relationships with parents also enhances continuity of care and consistency of infant routines, which can work to everyone's advantage. Obviously, helping to teach neglectful parents about the importance of their role in their child's life, and enhancing

their competencies, can make a lasting difference in the lives of many infants.

The responses to this survey indicate that these infant day care providers have an interest in additional training, and a desire to participate actively in the professionalization of day care provision.

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Guidelines for infant day care providers:

OPTIMIZING INFANT DEVELOPMENT

---The Critical Period of Infancy
Laying the Foundation for Later Learning
Welcoming New Families to the day care center

---The Child's Evolving Brain
Neuroscientific Evidence of the Effects of Quality Care
Neurons are a little like trees:
Dendritic spines branch out and connect with other neurons.
Experience creates new interconnections that allow more efficient functioning.
Lack of use causes some connections to die.
Together, the building of new useful connections and loss of useless connections produces new abilities to respond to the world.

---Strategies for Providing Optimal Infant Care
The Important Balancing Act: Staying in the "Zone"
Optimal Stimulation
Active vs Passive Learning
Expressive vs Receptive Language
Sensorimotor Stimulation and Experimentation
Responsive Environments Mobilize Mastery (REMM)

---Accommodating Individual Differences in Temperament
Matching the Lesson to the Student: Fine-tuning your Approach
Emotionality
Activity
Sociability
Difficult Babies: Avoiding Overpersonalizing and Burnout

---Collaborating Effectively with Parents
Guilty Parents: Helping them join the family!
Anxious, Insecure Parents: Supporting their strengths!
Angry, Overcontrolling Parents: Not fighting back!

---Maintaining Your Enthusiasm
Inspiring One's Colleagues: Making the Invisible Visible
Contributing to Our Understanding of Optimal Infant Care
Participating in Research Projects to Define "cutting edge care"